Sheffield Town Hall.

The Town Hall was built between 1890 and 1897, and then extended just after the First World War, to replace an earlier Town Hall of 1808, on Waingate. It is built of Stoke Hall Sandstone, of Kinderscout Grit age, from the quarry near Grindleford, which was founded in 1835, but is still extant. The medium-grained, buff sandstone is very uniform and lends itself to being shaped in any direction, so it is known in the trade as a freestone. At the upper levels a series of carvings illustrate the traditional trades of Sheffield and other themes. The roof is of greenish Westmorland Slate. The building was only approved after much debate about the best uses for the ratepayers’ money and several quotes were obtained. The Sheffield Independent of February 19th 1891 reported on the choice of stone for the Town Hall:

“The margins between the lowest and highest tenders are £11,872 on Coxbench stone, £9,124 on Stoke Hall stone and £12,467 on Huddersfield stone. The Municipal Buildings Sub-Committee…. has pronounced in favour of the alternative tenders of Mr Edmund Gabbutt of Liverpool, who offers to erect the buildings in Coxbench stone for £81,945,… or in stone from the Stoke Hall quarries for £83,943 – the lowest quotation in that material”.

No doubt, the distances from the quarries played a part in the pricing, with Grindleford being the nearest at 9 miles away, Coxbench, near Belper 27 miles and Huddersfield 21 miles. In spite of this, the quote using Stoke Hall stone was dearer, and yet was chosen for the job. It has stood the test of time very well, and has responded well to being cleaned, to remove the sooty outer coating resulting from the days before the smokeless zones were introduced in the 1960s.

In the event, the total cost of the building was over £134,000. The story goes that when Queen Victoria opened the Town Hall, she stayed in her coach, and pressed a button to slide the metal gates apart by electricity. In fact, employees were hidden behind each gate and pulled them apart manually! When the adjacent Peace Gardens were remodelled in the 1990s, the same quality of sandstone was still available from Stoke Hall and was used for the balustrades and for the bases of the large fountains.

Inside the Town Hall, the main Staircase Hall exhibits a range of decorative stonework, including Hoptonwood Limestone, red and black Devonshire fossiliferous limestone, green Connemara Marble and white Sicilian Marble.
Connemara Marble

The Main Staircase

Alabaster pillars, green Connemara Marble and fossiliferous Hoptonwood Limestone

Detail of Hoptonwood Limestone showing crinoids and a brachiopod shell

References:
Personal information from SCC Landscape Architects.
Sheffield Independent Feb 19th 1891.

Peter Kennett, v1, June 2015 © Sheffield Area Geology Trust